

## DOROTHY IVY 'STRUCKOIL' HEISER

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**I**n the third portion of my manuscript 'A History of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation'<sup>1</sup>, I wrote of the frustration which researchers experience due to a lack of data which should have been archived by previous generations. However one family whose story can be written in more detail is the Heiser family. As I wrote in the article mentioned above:

Mine is not a full history of Brisbane Jewry. This can never be written as much detail is no longer in existence. It has no doubt been destroyed in perennial 'spring cleanings'. In most organisations many papers, which could be of great interest to later researchers, have been discarded, for a secretary must choose between becoming swamped in his own archives or severely pruning them periodically. Also, those who could have recalled many an interesting fact are no longer with us.

On the other hand, I was fortunate to find a cryptic note in the Board's Minute Book which read only, 'Sam Heiser, Struckoil, Mt. Usher.' There are Heiser descendants still in Brisbane and I found that Sam had named his baby daughter 'Dorothy Ivy Struckoil Heiser.' She is known as 'Aunty Dot' and lives near Brisbane and she explained that the slang expression 'he struck oil' meant that 'he had struck it lucky.' Sam had not 'struck oil' but had found gold at his gold leases at Mt. Usher and recorded his luck by naming his new-born daughter 'Struckoil'. She told me she founded the Brisbane Jewish Scout Troop in the 1920s. It disbanded in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

Morris Z. Forbes (now OAM), who was then the Editor of the *Journal*, appended this footnote:

*Struck Oil* was the name of a play by the American actors, J.C. Williamson and his wife, Maggie Moore. They came to Queensland in 1894 when this play was staged at Mount



*Dorothy Heiser.*

Morgan. About that time a gold-bearing reef was discovered in the district and a shaft was put down and called 'Struck Oil'. A canvas town of gold prospectors sprang up within this area. Most successful was William Usher whose Mount Usher mine promised to develop as a rival to Mount Morgan. Struck Oil became a small mining field and a village. Today, Mount Usher and Struck Oil are not townships but the area is a rural residential one. See *Mount Morgan: Gold Copper and Oil* by John Kerr (1982); and F.L. Golding, 'An Old Mining Town in Queensland: Mount Morgan', *Journal, The Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 83.

Sam definitely did not find oil, as the name implies, for the nearest oil/gas field is about 400 km to the south east. In this article, I have confined myself mainly to the story of Dorothy. The main body of the Heiser narrative will be written in due course by the family's archivist, Bruce Heiser.

Dorothy, also called Aunt Dollie, told me that her name had a second connotation: 'My initials form the acrostic 'D.I.S.H.' My Dad said that this referred to the metal dish used by alluvial gold



prospectors when they were washing (that is, 'panning') a shovel-ful of wet sand, pebbles and gravel on the bank of a creek. By shaking it, fragments of gold were exposed.<sup>3</sup> The men who did this were called "diggers", from which came the term for the AIF troops in the latter part of the Boer War and in the First World War'.

Solomon Heiser, Dorothy's grandfather, was born in Kempen, Prussia, now Kepno, Poland. He migrated to Surrey in England where he met and married Sarah Hyman. Their first child, Sam, was born in July 1860 and in 1878 he married Rosetta Abrahams. Sam's father passed away and Sarah, Sam's mother, decided to migrate to Queensland in 1883, taking his four younger siblings with her as bounty immigrants. Then, in 1889, Sam and Rosetta followed with their children and were reunited with Sarah in Rockhampton. Sam originally worked there and at Mount Morgan as a tobacconist, stationer, bookseller and fancy goods merchant.

Dorothy was born in Rockhampton on 30 October 1895. She was the third child, born in Queensland, of Sam and Rosetta Heiser.

The question arises as to why did these folk, who surely had never heard of Central Queensland, come from the other side of the world and settle (and prosper) there? The answer is that the Australian immigration authorities wisely did not want all new arrivals to settle in the capital cities. Therefore, the ships would stop at some less settled places along the coast in the hope that passengers would terminate their voyages and settle there.<sup>4</sup>

Though Sam Heiser was involved in the search for gold out from Mount Morgan, most of the credit for the success of those fields must go to William Usher. He discovered gold on Mount Usher, which still bears his name. William developed his formerly tiny claim (originally worked only by him and his son) into a large and prosperous company, which even had a listing on the London Stock Exchange. An area of his earliest claim on Mt Usher was named 'Struckoil Reefs'.

D.W. de Havilland's book *Gold and Ghosts* makes reference to Sam Heiser and his finds, but does not give details of them. It tells of claims in that area, the names of which suggest the frenetic search, such as ... 'Lucky Hut', 'Busy Bee', 'Lucky Strike', 'Struck Oil', 'Last Chance', 'Last Charge', 'Miner's Rest', 'Heartbreak Reef', 'Little Vein'. The following abridged quotation from that book indicates the excitement which the finds engendered and refers to Sam Heiser's involvement in the dig:

Within hours of the Warden's report reaching Mount Morgan and Mr. J.M. Lynch ... bringing in 26 ozs. of nuggets, a rush





*This photo, taken about 1903, shows William Usher, seated left, with pipe and Samuel Heiser standing behind him, centre rear. It is possible that the man at the left is the famed Australian poet, Henry Lawson. Henry Lawson had just arrived back from England at this time. Lawson proposed to move into his new home in North Sydney to write a novel but first he travelled to Queensland to seek material for his novel and it is possible that he visited the goldfields for that reason. The gold nugget on the table may have been one named 'The Bottle'.*

of diggers headed for 'Peters Rush'. By 18 September, over 380 diggers were costeaning the creekbed and surrounding banks ... a nest of nuggets, over twenty in number, have been found in a patch of ground not more than a foot deep and about 2 feet long and 2 feet wide ...

On the same day, the Warden reported that a Mr. Samuel Heiser showed him ... two pieces of alluvial gold aggregating 74 ozs., which brought the total, found up to that date, to 302 ozs. The Heiser nuggets were located about 140 m. above the original Prospecting Claim and, within days of their first find, they located another 70 ozs. in smaller pieces. The James brothers ... located about 30 ozs. of nuggets ... Mr. Rule ... had a claim ... south of the original find and within days, had unearthed a 62 oz. nugget. News of these finds brought more excited diggers into the area and soon there were over 500



men ... seeking their fortunes. E. Linde and party soon found another patch of small nuggets and won about 4 ozs. of gold every day for some time. By this time, a tent town (containing up to 700 people) sprang up ... but had disappeared within two years.

Struck Oil is about 10 kilometres from Mount Morgan. A contemporary mining map shows it is about 2 kilometres from Mount Usher and quite close to the claim called 'Peter's Rush'. Through this area flows the little Dee River. A badly faded photo, probably taken nearly a century ago for the records of the Mount Morgan Mining Warden, shows several valuable nuggets weighing from 29 ounces to 182 ounces. These were stated to be typical of the finds during what was called 'The Dee River Gold Rush'. Each piece was irregularly shaped like a potato and they were 'large and well-rounded indicating that their original exterior had been eroded, having been washed downstream over gravelly, abrasive creek beds. A total of 4,350 ounces of alluvial nuggets was collected, valued in those days at £18,000 (Aust.). (Currently, that would be an enormous sum of money.) Thousands of fossickers quickly descended on that area but, by 1907, it was played out and deserted. However, to this day, fragments are still being kicked up.' (*The Queensland Mining Journal-November 1990*) Sam's gold finds on 'Peter's Rush' on the Dee River were reported in the press. One of the greatest nuggets found in that era was called 'Peter's Nugget', but it is not clear whether it was found by Sam.

Dorothy told me that, at some stage, the family operated pearling luggers for a few years. They employed descendants of kanakas<sup>5</sup> and Torres Strait Islanders as divers, based on Thursday Island. These vessels ranged over the Coral Sea and South West Pacific. Much later, other kinsfolk were involved in gemstone mining in Central Queensland and even as far south as Glen Innes and Inverell. They searched for, mined, processed and marketed sapphires, opals, emeralds, rubies, agates and garnets. Rosetta Kingston, Dorothy's daughter, and her husband operated a firm with the intriguing name of Hayrick's Black Opal Mining Co., which operated outside Quilpie.

While many of the Heiser family were involved in gold, gems and jewellery, some were/are solicitors, merchants, plumbers and one is an art gallery manager. In Sam's day (apart from seeking gold) the family was active in what is now called 'the hospitality industry'. The Mount Morgan Council Voter Rolls reveal that Sarah owned the National Queensland Hotel (Roll 1893) and the Metropole (Roll 1904), both in Mount Morgan. The Royal Hotel at Mount





*The Royal Hotel, Mount Usher*

Usher was built for Sam and he operated it from March 1897 to December 1904. Sam operated the Struck Oil Hotel from 1895 to 1897 when the license was taken over by Zalic Heiser, his younger brother. Zalic was the licensee of the Royal Hotel at Crocodile from 1897 to 1900. In 1900/05 Sam was the licensed victualler at the Commercial Hotel in Mount Usher. Early in 1908, the family visited England, returning in December 1908. About 1913 Sam was in Brisbane, where he died in 1919 and was buried in the Toowong cemetery.

Many years ago Dorothy asked me for a list of appropriate Israel-based and local Jewish funds, which she proposed to include as beneficiaries of her will. We were in touch occasionally after that, until she passed away in July 1988 at the venerable age of ninety-three. Under her will her estate passed to her daughter, Rosetta, on whose death the estate was to be divided between many relatives and organisations, including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Jewish National Fund and some other local Jewish activities. At the end of 1999, Rosetta passed on and, at the time of writing this article the estate is being wound up.

This short article on Dorothy Heiser, her parents and grandparents on her father's side illustrates the early beginnings of Australian Jewry in the nineteenth century. Many of the Jews who

migrated to Australia settled in country areas. They were the pioneers often connected with the goldfields, but they were usually the shopkeepers or involved in the hospitality industry running inns for travellers. Those who wished to maintain their Jewish heritage often moved later to the capital cities, reinforcing the Jewish community there. Thus it was with the Heisers and it is lucky, in this case, that sufficient family documentation has been preserved to tell the story.

## NOTES

1. This Brisbane history was spread over three issues of the *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*, i.e. Vol. IX, part 6, 1984; Vol. IX, part 7, 1984 and Vol. X, part 1, 1986.
2. In conjunction with the philanthropist, E.R. Isaacs, Managing Director of the emporium Hoffnung & Co. Pty Ltd, Dorothy provided much of the funds needed to equip the Judean Scout Troop in Brisbane. I was a member in 1933-'34.
3. When panning, no fragment is so tiny as to be rejected. Even little 'flakes' or 'flecks', smaller than a grain of salt (sometimes called 'colour'), are carefully dropped into the prospector's 'specimen bottle'. Being damp, they reflect the sun's rays and this makes them more easily discernable. 'Panning' is also a hobby by which some folk seek to pay for their camping trips, while 'old timers' are still about, who eke out a precarious living with a spade and dish. (Alluvial fragments on creek banks have usually been washed down from a lode or deposit further upstream. Many a 'digger' has spent his life in search of that elusive deposit.) (*See photo*)
4. New York remains one of the world's most populous cities because most migrant vessels made their first, or only, stop there.
5. The kanakas were brought to Australia in the early days, from Melanesia, as impressed labourers, mainly to harvest sugar cane. They were virtually slaves and the practice was outlawed in 1900-'01, with the onset of Federation. Most were repatriated to their home islands, but some chose to remain here and their descendants are hard-working, respected citizens of Far North Queensland.

## SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The late Dorothy Ivy Struckoil Heiser, herself.

The late Rosetta Kingston, (daughter of Dorothy).

Archives of the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation.

Bruce Heiser.- grand nephew of Dorothy Heiser. I appreciate the assistance he has given me in this compilation.

The Oxley Library.

Central Queensland University Library.

*The Rockhampton Star*.



*The Daily Mail* (now *The Courier-Mail*).

Carol Davis Stirk, for her valued secretarial services.

*Gold and Ghosts* by D.W. de Havilland.

Dennis Cleary, formerly of the Queensland Place Names Board.

Mitchell Library, Sydney.

The Rockhampton District Historical Society.

*Queensland — Her Past*. Alcazar Press.